

Twitch Plays Pokemon, the Meme Scene, & the Project of Hyperspace

Anonymous October 26, 2016

I stayed up all night, again, playing Pokemon Red with the Internet hivemind; ~60,000 monkeys banging on keyboards: up/down/left/right/a/b/start. The 3rd Millennium has brought with it endless possibilities for collective experience and, therefore, endless experiments in mass-politics. Each new project offers a different method for the users to organize their world through action, and each new project propels itself by bringing order to those actions

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Over the past twelve days 600,000 unique users have participated in a live-stream playthrough of the b&w Gameboy classic, controlling the actions of protagonist Red by entering commands into a chat window. Our hero is a schizoid: guided by many voices, all screaming at once.

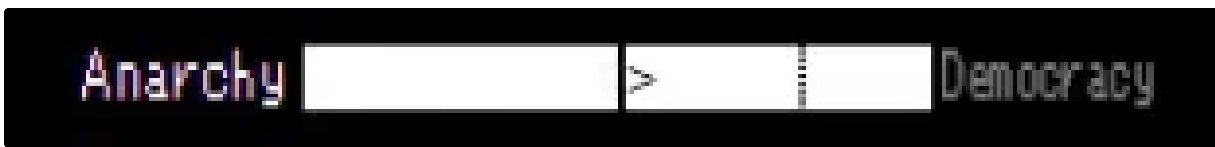
How he flails about! What fun!



The 3rd Millennium has brought with it endless possibilities for collective experience and, therefore, endless experiments in mass-politics. Each new project offers a different method for the users to organize their world through action, and each new project propels itself by bringing order to those actions (in the sense of *natura naturans*, the necessary activity of physical laws).

If we are to take hyperspace seriously, we must understand that those platforms which we use to work & play together are *structurally* political. Machines have always dictated our interpersonal relations in production, but today they are unfettered: their hyper-material laws are defined as by gods — *tsimtsum*, the finite out of the infinite.

The use of any particular platform is a political act in favor of its nature.



Twitch Plays Pokemon is a unique case study as it is explicitly aware of its own entanglement in politics, offering users the choice between two different methods of organizing their activities: Anarchy and Democracy.

The game was originally programmed to execute every command given, and the hivemind advanced, but incredibly slowly with a seemingly ‘directed randomness.’ With over 10 inputs per second controlling the action, moving Red and navigating menus becomes comedically erratic: doorways are overshot again & again, key Pokemon are accidentally released into the wild and the simplest puzzles must be brute-forced for hours.. and of course, the trolls keep

opening the Pokedex . As the hivemind grew to 50,000 on Monday, progression required Red’s careful navigation through a maze in which one false step would force him to begin again. Over the next 24 hours the collective reached 100,000 users, increasing the rate of input and thus increasing the difficulty of the task at hand. They continued to fail ... over & over & over.

As progress seemed practically impossible, the project’s anonymous designer implemented a voting system: commands would be tallied over the course of 20 seconds and the winner processed as input. As this would only allow three commands each minute, the programmer allowed for the chaining of commands — e.g ‘down3right2a’ — in order to accelerate activity. The more complex the chain, however, the less likely it is to win the vote. Democracy thus progresses methodically with a regulated execution of simple actions.

Shortly after the update this feature was used to stage a virtual protest. Those who liked the anarchic play began to vote for the command ‘start9’ as a unified bloc, easily outvoting the divided commands of the Democrats. What resulted was effectively the classic industrial-labor tactic of the slowdown: the start button would open the menu, temporarily halting gameplay. Though they still fulfilled their duties by entering commands and participating in governance, during the sustained campaign the productivity of the collective’s labors was nil.

In response to the protest came two new commands, Anarchy and Democracy, which are used to fight a ‘tug-of-war’ to determine which method of input is selected. Users must now spam their choice of government between commands to Red, and it is this explicit battle of ideologies that offers an opportunity to contrast these two political systems.

Though it has accomplished several difficult tasks in *Twitch Plays Pokemon*, Democracy has been used sparingly since its implementation — at *most* 5% of playtime. The Democrats have championed the slogan, “

Order is Progress,” but many users have decried its excruciatingly slow activity and it has met fierce resistance. There have been accusations of cheating on both sides — fake users running automated scripts — but, more often than not, when the bar gets close to Democracy the Anarchists step in to prevent the switch. The interesting part, of course, is when and why the hivemind chooses to use each system.

The project was initially anarchic, so there is something to be said for it being the constitutive constraint of the ‘social experiment’ — the addition of Democracy as *defeat* — but this is superficial, seeing necessity where there none. Indeed, progression is not the only measure of value: “If the game was being played with only the ‘correct’ button presses, then all of the memes we’ve been enjoying would never have come into existence.” As a platform for interaction, *Twitch Plays Pokemon* has spawned innumerable creative productions, from image macros to videos to a

complex mythology (with its own biblical texts); it is thus clear that participation in a collective experience is the primary motivation of the users, not merely a desire to complete an 18 year-old videogame.

Although there have been brief periods of Democracy when progress has been frustrated, it has been used most prominently to accomplish highly technical tasks. The initial use of Democracy to navigate the maze was a divisive issue and the opposition felt a lessened sense of accomplishment, but the collective seemed mostly comfortable using it to complete the Safari Zone which was highly improbable (it must be completed in a limited number of steps).

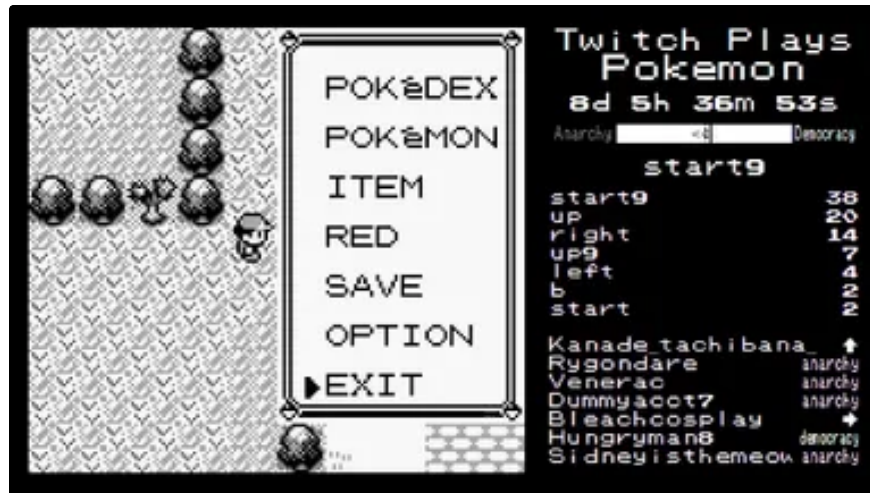
Though democratic modes of production can offer directed progress towards a particular goal, anarchic modes seem to produce a greater amount of memetic content due to their acceleration of activity,

interaction, etc. (an assumption about memetics: more interactions -> more productions). Play is yet to conclude, and we should really stay away from categorical causality, but even that the hivemind evaluates tasks and desires one or the other is absolutely fascinating.

Is it not wonderful to witness the return of mass-politics?

We must take this conflict of ideologies seriously!

The meme-machine scene sees it: “the paradigm of the era.”



Indeed it is the paradigm of the era if, perhaps, eras are now just the briefest of moments. The most drastic of changes has occurred in the low-art, shit-culture swill of social media platforms: an almost total shift in how the labors of users are organized in their co-production of a hyperspace — a change in the sorting algorithm — that has steered imgboard culture, if not most of Online mass-culture, from Anarchy to Democracy.

Do 4chan and reddit still require an introduction? Everyone seems to be in on the meme-culture game, so maybe make it mythical .. “The two hiveminds of the recent era are caricatures of Dionysus and Apollo,” if anyone is still into that *Birth of Tragedy* stuff. The two for(u)ms will always be, for me, wholly opposite each other: one is the cacophony of ‘sort-by-newest’ algorithms where any and all activity is thrust upon the collective consciousness — a few million people in a room, screaming; the other is the efficient organization of ‘sort-by-popular’ algorithms which organize by upvote, +1, Like, & Digg — those which, by definition, only value the center, the norm. They are both streams, but of different natures: one the extreme subjectivity of “fiction and falsehoods” and the other the strict objectivity of /r/AskScience.

“Does Democracy not require “that conquered & sectioned & unitized — Chronos”
to measure the collective’s single action in and of a particular present?

Our stream speaks, now, not with each mouth — all for one — but as the Mouth — one for all.”



We may talk about other kinds of streams, like the Libertarian freedom of Tumblr & Twitter (private property + filtered consumption) or the Sovereigns of the Blogosphere, but today, as always, pressing political action is taking place in the commons.

The purpose of democratic sorting algorithms is the regulation of time, such that a stream constitutes a shared present for the collective — something like an anti-history — where the particularities of individual expression are sacrificed in the formation of a cohesive *now*. The experience of such a stream is thus, itself, regulated. One can never experience more than the system of organization will allow — what it has declared to be a part of each successive moment — but the collective can deliberate, producing stable activity towards a particular objective.

Anarchistic sorting algorithms create a different kind of time such that the temporal experience of the stream is constituted by action instead of second-hand ticks. The present produced is the orgiastic froth of an indeterminate number of individual expressions, uniquely known by each user in organic social experience. In an anarchistic sort, time *is* activity: to go further, one must merely do — but the results are erratic, favoring exploration rather than goal-oriented progression.

If we are to take hyperspatial politics seriously, we must understand that the engagement with anarchistic projects, such as *Twitch Plays Pokemon*, and acts of resistance against the encroachment of today’s dominant mode-of-production, such as the start9 protest, constitute meaningful criticism of the

industrialization of our techno-social labor and the particular temporal experience that democratic platforms engender.

This is not to say that ‘sort-by-popular’ algorithms have no place, or that the political choice made by each user in *Twitch Plays Pokemon* is reflective of their meatspace ideologies. *Twitch Plays Pokemon* does not somehow ‘prove’ that Anarchy is the right system of government and demand revolution, but it does show that Democracy has applications, not a mandate to organize all forms of activity.

To be kind of trite:

*The horrors of the 20th Century deeply scarred the Left,
but to engage in radical egalitarianism is to recognize its possibility.*



Leftists in the 3rd Millennium will not find success in dated, mechanical-Marxist prophecies of the Coming Revolution, “necessarily” borne out of the “contradictions of Capitalism” — a quaint politics of simpler times. The uprisings around the globe have been inspiring, whatever their result, but we do not mistake them for global insurrection. The interwoven spectacle of capitalism and democracy is, for all intents and purposes, unassailable and inescapable: what fool, today, would consider conditions favorable for a war of maneuver?

The point of paying attention to internet cesspools, meme machines and hyperspatial happenings is that today the only option is a war of position: a sustained ideological battle that seeks the expansion of support for egalitarian institutions. The New Godzilla can at most be trained, *but perhaps into submission!*

A techno-revolutionary politics does not propose reform or adventure, but instead demands exploration. It needs theorists and politicians, but also engineers and artists. The possibility of the hivemind running on a different algorithm must be *demonstrated* — not in proof, but in practice! Where but hyperspace can a collective form in less than a week at one-million strong? What a laboratory! What a bullhorn!

Twitch Plays Pokemon is an ideological weapon, demonstrating at a fundamental level that the order of Democracy denies a particular freedom in its collection of experience.. but *reddit* is, also — “powered by community, democracy and you” — and proves this same order’s efficiency despite a great frequency of activity.. and look how *4chan* served as this fascinating little incubator for radical politics amidst all that anonymous chaos.. Every site has a sort, which means it has a politics.

At the risk of being at once 2srs and “not serious enough” (ibid.), I want to propose that we are participating in a new geopolitics wherein the ‘geography’ is made of 1s and 0s — *wholly contingent*. The radical left, in the era of hyperspatial politics, is tasked with producing experiments which test new systems of organization and discover the limits of old ones. If there is any egalitarian solution to the grand project that is Politics it will be proved in hyperspace first.

tl;dr

A techno-revolutionary politics is about harnessing low-art, shit-post, circle-jerk, Large Memetic Colliders.

It’s the robber baron era of Internet culture-machines and we’re all proles, caught in the gears!

Politically speaking, it is a question of how information is ordered & there is only one tenant of the New Religion:

“When people receive similar sets of information people act similarly.”

Hegemony in the 3rd Millennium will, as always, be enacted by baptism.

Hegemony in the 3rd Millennium is, as always, a drowning in The Stream.

Philosophically speaking, it is a question of faithmen and rockbeds, and *natura naturans*.

(it should be pronounced to rhyme with ‘cream’)